NORTHWEST REFLECTIONS ON THE YUNJING

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Abbreviations

LTCA     Late Tang Chang’an
ONWC     Old Northwest Chinese
STCA     Sui-Tang Chang’an
SZ       Shazhou 沙州
YJ       Yunjing 聞鏡

I. Introduction

In the study of Chinese historical phonology the medieval sets of grids, called dengyuntu 等韻圖 in Chinese and “rime tables” in English, have long been of considerable interest. Most modern studies dealing with rime tables take as their basis a text called the Yunjing 聞鏡 (YJ). This work is thought to be one of the oldest exemplars of the genre, but in fact very little is known about it. We do not know when, where, or by whom it was written, or even what its purpose was. Since some of its structural terminology is connected with the rime nomenclature of the Qieyun 切韻 (QY), the YJ is assumed to be associated in some way with the QY and is often treated as a sort of systematization of the QY inventory of distinctions. However, the fact that it is surely later than the QY in origin ensures that it cannot have been directly based on the phonological structure of any actual dialect of QY times. The received version of the YJ dates from the late twelfth century. The Song-period prefaces to this YJ edition and to its closely related sister text, the Qiyinlue 七音略, indicate that at that time the origin of the rime table tradition was already lost and was thought to have been “distant” (yuan 遠). It was also believed to have entered China through the medium of Buddhism and to have been fostered by monks (七音之作，自西域流入諸夏。梵僧欲以此教傳天下，故為此書 “As to the origin of the Seven [Classes of] Sounds, they passed into

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China from the Western Regions. Buddhist monks desired to transmit these teachings to the whole world, and so they wrote this book [i.e. the *Qiyinlue*].

The YJ grids first categorize Chinese syllables by initial and final segments and then divide these broad categories into more finely differentiated classes. One of the most enigmatic of these subdivisions involves the syllable finals. The grids first arrange the finals by tone class and then place them in one of four horizontal rows, which have no special name either in the received YJ and *Qiyinlue* texts or in their Song-time introductory apparatus. In the *dengyunxue* 等韻學 tradition the four rows have been called the *sideng* 四等, usually translated as the “four divisions (or grades).” The term 四等 is well-known in Chinese Buddhist sources and traditionally denotes several quadripartite lists of virtues or qualities of the Buddha. But what connection this may have with the four rows of the rime tables, if any, is unclear. And more importantly, the phonological significance of the rows is obscure. This is a pity, because if we knew what the rows denoted we might recover fundamental facts about the syllable finals of whatever (if any) linguistic reality underlay the tables. But the simple fact is, we do not know what the four rows in the YJ represented. A number of theories have been proposed about this; but in the end all these theories are nothing more than speculations. It is conceivable that someday we may discover a contemporary explanation of the rows which would solve the problem. Or, alternatively, there is the admittedly unlikely possibility that we may find out 1) who developed the system of the four rows, and 2) what his language sounded like, in which case we might be able to deduce the meaning of the rows by associating the necessary readings with their appropriate places in the tables and observing how the contrasting forms in the rows differed from each other. But until then it is hard to see how we can possibly solve the riddle of the four rows in any conclusive way.

Be this as it may, it still possible as a matter of interest to read the YJ tables off in the pronunciation of living dialects and observe how the syllables in the different rows compare with each other. And, presumably, such an exercise has been possible for literate persons since the very time the tables were constructed. And, in this vein it would be fascinating for us today to hear a medieval Chinese read the YJ aloud, regardless of what dialect he spoke or how similar his language was to that (or those) of the YJ